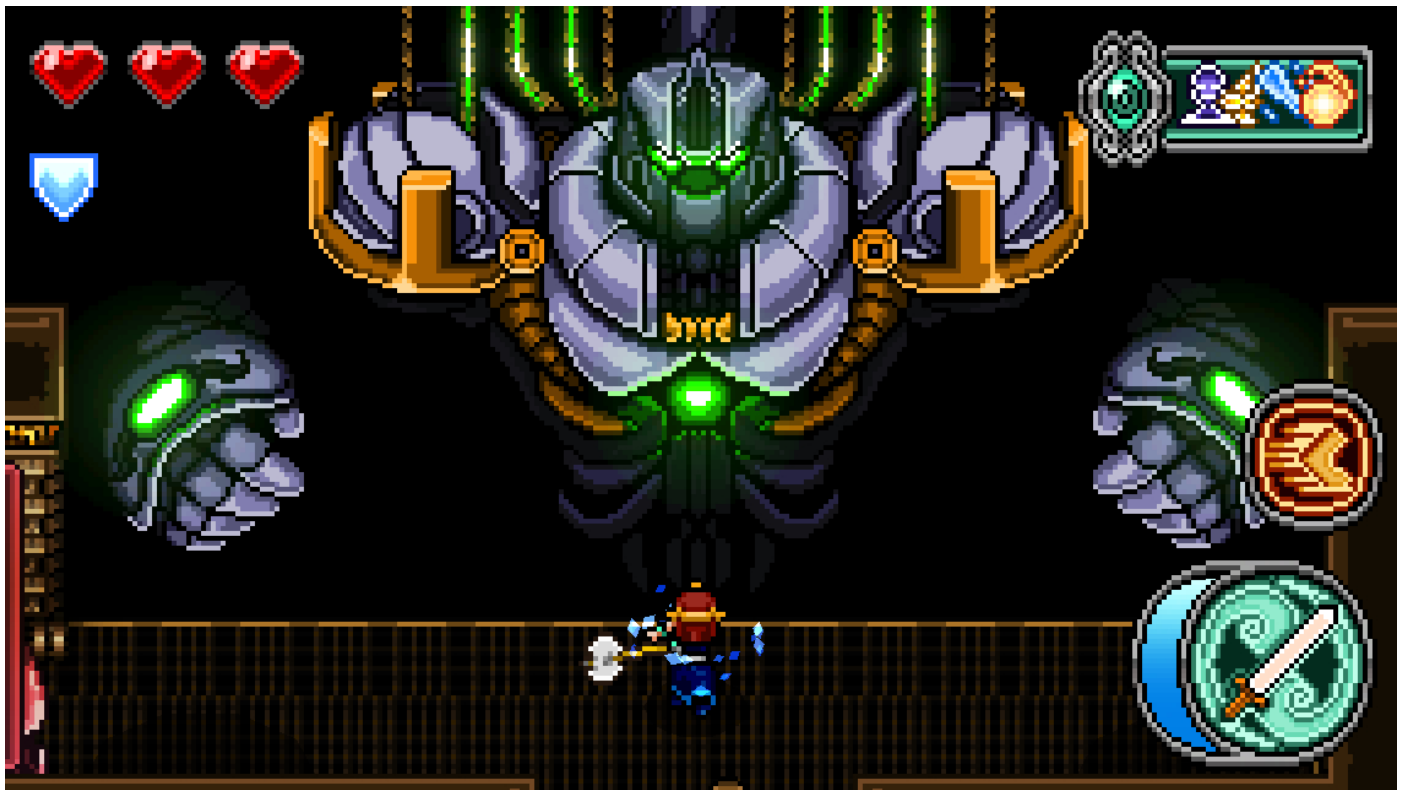


RPG Reload File 053 – 'Mage Gauntlet'

[August 27, 2015](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we smash everything in search of new hats. Each week, we pull an RPG from the past of the App Store to see how it holds up to our highly-advanced, futuristic, utopian society. It's a chance to revisit old favorites, reflect on a game's overall place on the platform, or just to take a nice deep dive in a way our reviews don't usually allow for. As the kindly old wizard watching over these proceedings, I try to pick a nice balanced plate from week to week. If you feel like I'm missing something cool, however, please let me know. You can give me suggestions by commenting below, posting in [the Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). I can't promise I'll get to it soon, but it will go on the master list which means I'll get to it eventually.



This week, we're taking a look at Rocketcat's first iOS game that doesn't involve swinging off of grappling hooks. *Mage Gauntlet* ([Free](#)) made a [pretty big splash](#) when it released in late 2011, and it's not difficult to see why. Even though it was the developer's first stab at an RPG, it was surprisingly well-done and put most of its contemporary action-RPG competition to shame. It has all the things we've come to expect from a Rocketcat game: wonderfully-detailed graphics, secrets galore, more hats than you can shake a stick at, and a sometimes-bizarre sense of humor that lends the whole package a great deal of charm. It seems to have been a pretty big hit for Rocketcat, and eventually spawned a spiritual successor in the form of the [superb](#) *Wayward Souls* ([\\$7.99](#)). It's kind of funny that the whole thing [started off as a twin-stick shooter](#).

Rocketcat Games is a small, three-person developer whose first completed game released on iOS in 2009. Prior to forming the team, none of the members had any substantial game development experience, with the possible exception of Jeremy Orlando's work programming flash versions of Mahjong. The three were big gamers, and especially enjoyed first-person shooters. They felt that the genre was stagnating, however, and decided

they wanted to do something about it. Well, life can take you down some interesting detours at times. The first game they designed was called *Rocketcat*, but they ended up not releasing it. That game did at least provide them with both a name for their team and a mascot. Instead, their first release was a side-scrolling swinging game called *Hook Champ* [\(Free\)](#), which came out in October of 2009. It is an excellent game, but it is not an RPG, so that's all I've got to say about that.



It was successful enough that they were able to get to work on more games, and over the course of the following year, Rocketcat released two more swinging games, *Super QuickHook* [\(Free\)](#) and *Hook Worlds* [\(Free\)](#). Those follow-ups did well enough for the developer that they were able to go into making games full-time, which is a good thing because their next project was a big one. Initially conceived as a top-down, twin-stick shooter, *Mage Gauntlet* would go through a couple of different forms en route to its eventual late 2011 release as a stage-based action-RPG. Interestingly, through all of these changes, the story and characters stayed more or less the same.

At first, it was an action game where spells were picked up and consumed at a steady rate, with a maximum of four possible spells in your inventory at any one time. You could tap a button to detonate a spell, setting off a big explosion that would wipe out a bunch of enemies. That would switch you to the next spell, and if you happened to run out before you picked up anything new, you would have to survive using your weak normal shot. Basically, it was more *Smash TV* than *Secret Of Mana* ([\\$7.99](#)) in the beginning. Its next form was as a randomly-generated dungeon dive, a concept Rocketcat would end up coming back to with *Wayward Souls*. Eventually, they settled on a more traditional action-RPG, resulting in the *Mage Gauntlet* we know and love.



Some of the vestiges of its twin-stick shooter days remain, however, and it's part of what gives the game its unique flavor. You can only carry four spells at once, and they're all one-time use. You have a finite amount of lives, progression is stage-based, and even some of the enemy attack patterns give a peek at how it might have been as a pure action game. This is one of those action-RPGs that falls pretty heavily on the action side of that hybrid genre, lending it a clear focus and fast pace that sometimes is missing in

other games. Imagine if someone had a mind to make an arcade version of *Secret Of Mana*, and you wouldn't end up far from *Mage Gauntlet*, I think.

You can tell the developers are fans of Square's classic SNES action-RPG, because the melee combat in *Mage Gauntlet* feels like a condensed version of the one found in that game. You can make quick and wide swipes, stronger and heavier attacks, or charge up to launch a powerful long-ranged attack on the enemy. That draws from a stamina meter that constantly refills when you're not using it. You'll also use that meter when you're dashing, so you have to be careful how you're consuming it in case you need to get out of the way of an attack quickly. Though the basic system is similar to *Secret Of Mana*, the way enemies react to your strikes feels a lot like *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past*. It's relatively easy to play keep-away with enemies that can only stumble towards you, but they'll soon start mixing in projectiles and charge attacks of their own, forcing you to change up your battle strategy.



The basic goal in each set of stages is to work your way from the entrance to the exit. Sometimes that will require you to kill enemies to open the way

forward, but not always. The stages come in sets of four, with the fourth round typically being a boss battle against an oversized beastie of some sort. Beating the boss will usually earn you a new trinket and open up a new set of stages. In all, there are more than 50 stages, and running through the game's Master Mode to get the extra ending doubles that. Each stage contains several secret areas and rooms that you can find in fine old tradition by humping the walls like a frisky dog. These secret rooms will always contain either health, a spell, or a haste potion. Some of them will also contain some sort of text that fills in part of the game's backstory. The former is useless for the first half of the game and absolutely vital in the last half, but the latter is always welcome.

Although it's a pretty simple story, *Mage Gauntlet* has a playful tone that makes every speech, note, and threat interesting to read. You play as a young woman named Lexi, who is not only unable to use any magic, but actually causes damage to magical objects when she touches them. For most of us, this wouldn't be a problem, but Lexi lives in a world where everyone uses magic in their daily lives. Without any options to turn to, she seeks the aid of a great wizard named Whitebeard, a great hero who sealed away an evil creature named Hurgoth many years earlier. He constructs a magical artifact called the Mage Gauntlet that allows Lexi to draw magic from her surroundings and use it. He then tasks her with seeking out the three Guardian Wizards that are scattered around the world to get their help in the coming rematch with Hurgoth. Spoiler alert: you'll end up doing just about everything on your own. Each of the sets of stages will usually have at least one other character that Lexi will converse with throughout her travels, and these dialogues are generally pretty funny. The notes you find along the way are sometimes a bit darker and less jokey, but they all add to the overall atmosphere quite nicely. Naturally, there's more going on than meets the eye, but I'll leave the fun of uncovering that to you.



During the first half of the game, you can get by almost entirely on your melee skills. You'll probably need to throw a spell or five at the bosses, but otherwise, magic is really just there to play around with. Once you move into the second of the game's three main areas, you'll probably need to start using some spells for crowd control, and by the end, well, hopefully you've been practicing. Although Lexi levels up along the way, the only way to extend her life bar is to use one of the few relics that will add one extra heart. It's easy enough to keep from running out when there are only a couple of enemies around, but when they start mixing behaviors in big numbers, you'll have to start playing things more carefully. Some will charge at you, others will toss projectiles in various directions, some explode, while others will just try to crowd you, distracting you from the deadlier foes. As you complete each stage in a set, your hearts will be refilled, and you can of course find some health pick-ups around, but should you run out, you'll consume one of your three lives. If you run out of lives, you'll have to start the whole stage over again. Given the size of some of the levels, that could be a real bummer.

The other incentive to stay alive is to earn stars. Perhaps again showing off its action roots, the game will give you up to three stars for completing a

stage. The first star is awarded simply for beating the level, while the others are given out for not losing any lives and for clearing out all of the enemies. Collect enough stars and you'll unlock pets, creatures that follow you around and give you a stat boost. Strictly speaking, you don't need pets, but they're fun rewards that motivate you to finish each stage thoroughly. If you don't care about any of that, you could probably rush your way through *Mage Gauntlet* in a matter of hours, but I can't imagine many RPG players doing that for their first run. You see, Rocketcat is a very clever bunch of developers. They put tons of breakable items in every stage. There are no items in these breakables. There is no reason to break them unless you are trying to unlock achievements. But if you can resist breaking virtually everything you come across, you are made of sterner stuff than I am, friend.



One of the things I really like about *Mage Gauntlet* is that the gear you equip is visible. Every melee weapon has its own sprite, and armor changes will actually show. This being Rocketcat, there are over 100 hats to collect, and each of them will change your appearance as well. The hats are simply cosmetic, but the various armor pieces, weapons, and trinkets all have their own effects. It's fun to play around with the various combinations to find

things that work well for your style. For example, certain armor pieces will make specific spells stronger, while certain trinkets will increase your likelihood of finding those spells. Put them together, and you're playing like a winner. Or you can just ignore all of that and make your favorite fashion disaster. You can get away with that, at least until Master Mode. I know it's meaningless to the actual gameplay, but I love it when a game shows my character wearing what I've equipped them with. It makes me cherish getting new gear just a little bit more.

The real appeal of *Mage Gauntlet* is from Rocketcat's usual combo, though. The game just feels good to play, and there's an unbelievable attention to detail running through the whole thing. Enemies can hit each other, pieces of damaged items will get tossed around when things move across them, and although levels are made up of a lot of repeating tiles, there are still plenty of unique sprites you'll only ever see in one place. While I'm on the look of the game, I have to spill some praise. I don't know how such a small team is able to make games that look so great, but I love it. Many try to nail the look of SNES games, but Rocketcat has it down to a science. They're able to put together games that look like they came from some of Square's top teams in the 16-bit era, and that's certainly the case here.



Although you only ever have a few actions at your disposal at any one time, there's a fair bit of nuance to the gameplay. You'll need to learn enemy behavior, but you'll also need to be swift and skilled to put that knowledge into action. Lexi technically doesn't get anything new in terms of gameplay abilities during the game, but you'll still be learning new tricks and tackling groups of enemies in different ways as you pick through the adventure. A lot of people have complimented *Mage Gauntlet* by saying it's just like an actual SNES game popped out in 2011. I say that doesn't do it justice. It *looks* like it came from that classic era, but its gameplay sensibilities are decidedly modern, and that makes for an exciting combination. Best of all, it suits mobile gaming well, with convenient save options, and satisfying burst play that doesn't compromise the game's value as a larger meal.

The app itself has been very well-maintained. The game originally had a pretty nasty difficulty curve that didn't suit it very well. Updates smoothed that out a bit to create a more natural rise in challenge. Universal support was added, as was support for 4-inch screens. That said, most of the updates in the last few years have been for bug fixes, but that's fine. The game is essentially complete as-is. There's a big warning on its App Store

description about investigating save file issues with iOS 8, but I didn't run into any on my playthrough, so I'm not sure anything actually came of that. In any case, I'm sure Rocketcat will fix anything that goes wrong with the game as long as they're around. They've more than earned my trust.



Not only does *Mage Gauntlet* still hold up today, I think it might actually be even better in the current iOS ecosystem. Many of its competitors in the action-RPG genre have disappeared or gone free-to-play, leaving it as one of the few high-quality paid entries in the genre on iOS. In fact, I think I'd consider it to be on the short list of essential iOS apps for mobile RPG fans. Playing through the game again from scratch was just as enjoyable for me as it was the first time, so if you're thinking of giving it the titular reload, I can certainly endorse it. If you haven't played it at all, you've got some homework for the weekend, friends. While its not without its flaws, it's shockingly well-made for a developer taking their first stab at a genre that is too easy to get completely wrong. The developers learned their lessons from the classics, but avoided being slaves to them, instead carving their own wonderful path.

That's just my opinion on Mage Gauntlet, though. What do you all think? I

want to know, so please leave your thoughts by commenting below, posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or my tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). We'll actually be recording the next episode of the **RPG Reload Podcast** this weekend, with *Mage Gauntlet* being the featured game. If you have any questions about the game, RPGs in general, or Eric's weird obsession with cakes, drop us a line at rpgreloadpodcast@gmail.com. We might read your letter on the air! As for me, I'll be back next week, not with another RPG, but with a history lesson about RPGs! Oh, goodie!

Next Week's Reload: *The History Of Handheld RPGs – Part 1*